

## **OLYMPIC SPORTS COACHING EDUCATION: AN INTERNATIONAL COACH'S PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT:** The profession of high performance sports coaching is a complex process focused on performance improvement with the goal of producing international sporting success. Rising demand for top-level coaches has been matched with the increasing amount of resources allocated to producing world-class performances. This includes creating and sustaining a culture of learning and competition. For a foreign coach, the culture of an adopted country can differ dramatically from that in their homeland. This discussion explores the challenges and opportunities an expatriate coach may experience in an effort to succeed in an adopted nation at the highest level of competition.

*Keywords:* high performance coaching, coaching education, expatriate coaching

The professionalization of sports coaching has evolved in recent years but hiring coaches dates back to the mid-19th century. The Yale Rowing team hired William Wood in 1864 as the first intercollegiate coach in the U.S. to help them beat its rival Harvard (Dealy, 1990). With the increases in professionalization of sport around the world, there are no signs of slowdown in the increase in resources allocated to sport at all levels (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2016).

The following data illustrated the state of play at the Olympic level of competition after the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. For participation at the Olympics, since the 1970's, the growth of Olympic Games has been on many levels. The total number of events increased from 198 in Montreal to 306 in Rio in 2016 and as a result, the total athletes have increased from 600 in 1976 (Montreal) to over 10500 in 2016 (Rio) (IOC, 2016).

The International Olympic Committee is focused on increasing the internationalization of participation for the Olympic Games. This is reflected in an increase in countries represented at the Olympics and also the number of countries winning medals. The number of National Olympic Committees sending athletes increased from 92 countries in 1976 to 206 in Rio in 2016. Total medal winning countries has doubled since Montreal in 1976, 41 countries won at least one medal and in Rio 2016, 87 countries won medals (IOC, 2016).

In financial terms, the pressure to perform and win medals grows even stronger. The Australian media have reacted to underperformance of their athletes wondering if their \$340 million dollar investment was worth it for the 2016 Rio Olympics. In Rio, Australia won 29 medals, at a cost of \$12.5 million per medal. Great Britain spent \$600 million on the 2016 Olympic cycle which is around \$10.9 million per medal. High Performance Sport New Zealand spent \$163 million at \$11.6 million per medal. The U.S. spent over \$1 billion on the 2016 Games cycle which would also be around \$11 million per medal (IOC, 2016). The significance of the relationship between money spent and Olympic

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success has been well documented (Bernard & Busse, 2000, 2004; Hogan & Norton, 2000). Bernard and Busse (2000) found that “medal winning has become less concentrated, with large and prosperous nations winning a smaller share of medals, and with more smaller and less prosperous nations among the regular medal winners” (p.23).

As demand in the global market for high performance coaches expands, more coaches are being hired from outside of the region in which they may have been born or received their training. Smith (2011) confirmed that while coaching mobility has been typically short-term and in close proximity to one’s home country, global trends indicate a growing willingness for coaches to move further away and for longer periods. Hubbard (2011) reported, of the 26 Olympic sports at London 2012, in Great Britain 21 sports had senior coaches or directors recruited from abroad.

High performance coaches are most successful at connecting with their athletes, by understanding their norms, their values and beliefs (Maitland, Hills & Rhind, 2015). Why is better coaching a function of better connection with athletes? This paper explores some of the findings in the literature about expatriate coaches, and examines the complexity of understanding and mastering culture. The paper also provides some examples of strategies that successful coaches have implemented in cultures of a new homeland.

Cultural diversity in coaching needs more attention in the literature and especially because limited attention has focused on the topic of issues of nationality, which focus on coaches and athletes of differing national background. Kamphoff, Gill, Araki & Hammond, (2010) are not alone in their call for greater attention to be focused on addressing cultural diversity, especially issues of nationality in coaching development and education. This discussion highlights an aspect of what coaches need to know and do to excel as a high performance coaches. Understanding the coaching context is not unique to high performance coaching, but defining the context at the highest level is differentiated by the level of complexity that comes with professionalization of the sport.

### **Coaching Abroad and Olympism**

Human history is characterized by people moving, races mixing and undoubtedly explains why civilization as we know it has advanced. The migration of sporting talent and the resultant global cultural flow can develop at least five different dimensions (Appadurai, 2011). The international flow of people produces ‘ethoscapes.’ The ‘technoscapes’ are created by the movement of equipment, machinery and technology. The finance scapes are the flow of money around the world. The mediascape is a function of the images and information that are produced. And the ‘ideascapes’ are the flow of ideas that come from movement globally.

Migration in sports and the international movements of athletes and coaches have many examples:

- basketball coaches and players move to and from the U.S. and Europe, football players and managers to and from Latin America, Africa, and Europe.
- ice hockey players from Canada and Russia move in different directions in the western world.
- baseball personnel moved to and from the Caribbean, the U.S. and Japan, and
- African distance runners represented different nations at the Olympic Games (Bales & Maguire, 2013).

Robertson (1990) described these trans-national movements as key to sustaining the exchange and flow that introduced their home sports to world. Taylor (2010) examined British soccer coaches working abroad from 1910-1950 and found that the transfer of football (soccer) knowledge across culture was not straightforward at all. And as a result, coaching methods and strategies were adapted to suit local circumstances. These coaches were essential components of the transfer of ideas about football (soccer) to the world (Carter, 2006). This example of globalization of sport is characterized by the growth of international sporting organizations, the competition among national teams, the worldwide acceptance of rules governing each sport and the expansion of international sporting events like the FIFA World Cup and Olympic Games (Bales & Maguire, 2013).

Torres (2012) contended that expatriate coaching at the Olympic level extends the tenets of Olympism. The vision of the Modern Olympics was based on Pierre Coubertin's humanism of fair play, participation for sport's sake, and moral development and aims to enrich life experience and lead to a fully integrated individual (Coubertin, 1967).

Olympism is a mindset that transcends sport and reflects a philosophy of development of the individual and mankind. In the context of coaching, Torres (2012) argued that coaching abroad is a pursuit of embracing sporting culture and advancing it. According to Orlowski, Wicker & Breur (2016), five factors contribute to a coach's consideration of a coaching position abroad: income, contract length, responsibilities, reputation of the position, and language requirements.

### **Understanding Culture in Sport**

Ryska, Zenong, Cooley, & Ginn (1999) defined sports culture as the “attitudes, values and beliefs engendered by sport in that particular society. As another description, the notion that culture of the same sport in different countries is the same is as highly unlikely as is the culture of different sports in the same country are the same.

The discussion of culture in organizations is not a new discussion (Martin & Siehl, 1983). Cooke & Rousseau (1988) defined culture as the way things are done with a common understanding of beliefs, values and actions and that valuing culture is a function in developing an ideal organization.

According to Kamphoff, Gill, Araki & Hammond (2010), more literature is required on the issues of nationality (defined as athletes and coaches working together from other

countries). With an increase in the impact of globalization in sports coaching, a growing need exists for developing a better understanding of cultural diversity and how it impacts sporting performance. Jones & Wallace (2005) highlighted an absence of a comprehensive framework to represent the ambiguity and complex reality within coaching work.

Expatriate coaches often learn to move away from their more traditional coaching practice of ‘watch and copy’ to more innovative approaches so they could be more considerate of their host’s culture (Carter, 2006, Smith, 2011, Taylor, 2010). Taylor (2010) argued that expatriate coaches have helped to develop sport around the world as they are agents of change. Smith (2011) suggested that expatriate coaches follow coaching opportunities where there is a demand for their coaching talent and expertise.

Wang & Calloway (2011) argued to be successful, Olympic coaches from abroad need to understand the differences of culture, political structures, language, communication, style of administration, coaching philosophy, and sports systems. Their findings encourage international Olympic coaches to develop a conscious awareness and sensitivity to culture of their adopted country so they can effectively produce results on the international stage of competition.

Expat coaches at the international level of competition have shown and continue to prove that success is possible. After great success in the 1960’s in his homeland, New Zealander, Arthur Lydiard long distance running coach moved to coach in Finland and was successful there too. New Zealander, Robbie Deans coached the Australian Rugby team to international success. German born rowing coach, Jurgen Grobler, took two Olympic gold medals for Great Britain at the 2016 Olympic in Rio extending his coaching streak of gold medals with GB rowing that started in 1992. Each has results reflecting an understanding of the culture of their adopted nations to develop successful systems to get the most out of the resources and people that they have been able to utilize.

### **Reflections of an International Coach**

After returning from the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, I share a contrast of what I have experienced since my first Olympics in Athens in 2004. I was born in Australia and was raised in a Greek family. I have lived in the United States for the last 16 years. It seems that more and more coaches are better qualified and the drive to succeed is growing every year. The gap between success and failure at the Olympic level in almost all sports is getting tight and tougher. The International Olympics Commission (IOC) seemed to have found a successful formula in that more nations are participating at the Olympics and it also appears that more nations are also winning medals.

This topic of international coaching at the Olympic level is of great interest to me. This is because I come in contact with more and more coaches that are establishing themselves abroad now more than ever before. The conversations on culture, adapting, and learning are on-going in international coaching.

My own learning as an Australian living in the U.S. also continues to evolve. The two countries have many similarities from the language spoken to the love of sport, the competitive drive and the historical links to Europe and Great Britain.

One aspect of American culture that stands out as the model to the rest of the world is the evolution of higher education. More specifically, the notion of the “student-athlete” is a result of athletic programs competing at the highest level. The drive for excellence at the collegiate level is having a direct effect on performance at the Olympic Games across so many Olympic sports.

The number of international student-athletes on US college rosters has risen dramatically (Weston, 2006). In 1991, 8.5% of student athletes were not from the US, by 1996 the percentage had double to 17.1%. And during the decade from 2000-2009 the number of international student-athletes in NCAA Division I rosters had increased by more than 1000% (Hosick, 2010). While it is not a new phenomenon, relatively little is known about the migration of student-athletes to US college compared to the academic-talent migration and it is a complex, covert and problem that needs more attention in regard to intercollegiate athletes (Bale, 1991).

American colleges have supported their student-athletes to attend university through awarded scholarships as one of many means of support (Fleisher, Goff & Tollison, 1992). International student-athletes have been attending US based NCAA colleges since the 1950's (Stidwell, 1984). Over 17,000 international student-athletes competed in US colleges in 2014-2015 (NCAA, 2016). From an adult learning perspective the cultural diversity and cross-cultural comparisons are a critical aspect of life on a college campus (Bollinger, 2003). McMahon (1992) stressed the importance of understanding the economic, educational and political factors that influence mobility patterns of international students. Understanding the motivation of international student-athletes has been the focus of a number of research studies. Some researchers have identified that international student-athletes may come to the US as they may not be satisfied with the sporting opportunities in their native countries (Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, 2009). The challenges that international student-athletes face attending school in the US are unique and complex compared to their non-athlete and non-international peers (Watt & Moore, 2001). The international student-athlete is faced with a new education system, in a new country and a different culture (which for many includes a new language) that comes with living and competing in a new nation (Kontaxakis, 2015).

Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Educational Amendments of 1972 states “any institution receiving federal funds may not discriminate against anyone by gender” but is best known for its impact on high school and collegiate sports which is not mentioned in the original statutes. The Equity in Disclosure Act of 1994 resulted in institutions having to annually disclose all program information (rosters, budgets, scholarships, and coaches’ salaries) to assist in improving compliance procedures for Title IX (Anderson, Knowles & Gilbourne, 2004). This legislation has contributed to Olympic successes by increasing the athletes participating; there are more programs, hiring more coaches and with more resources in U.S. Olympic women’s sports (Brake, 2001).

One example of this is the success and establishing a winning culture is that of the U.S. Women's eight at the Olympic Games in the sport of rowing. Their record is unprecedented, undefeated in international competition for the last 11 years, and in 2016 winning their third Olympic gold medal in a row. The evolution of Title IX is one of the reasons that rowing in the U.S. and especially in the Women's eight has become a dynasty and complete domination of the rest of the world.

The culture of the U.S. Women's gymnastics is another example of success on the international stage. After achieving Olympic success coaching Nadia Comencini for Romania at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, Bela and Martha Karolyi defected from Romania to the U.S. in 1981. They were able to establish a dynasty of world-class standards in Texas with their own gymnastics training center. With the retirement of the Karolyis from coaching, their Olympic Gold Medal in Women's team Gymnastics at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games may end their reign for the U.S. Women at the Olympic games that dates back to the success of Mary-Lou Retton and her Olympic gold medal at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

For an expatriate coach working in a foreign coaching environment, knowledge and expertise alone are not enough to be successful at the Olympic Games (Wang & Calloway, 2011). Whether it is the development of a pipeline of athletes such as with the US Women's rowing program, or a Romanian defector to the U.S. who had a vision of Olympic glory in gymnastics, the drive and determination to create a successful athletic program comes down to managing the complexity of many moving parts. From understanding how to motivate people, through the critical selection of outstanding talents, creating a competitive environment is a fundamental aspect of a coach's success and this is especially the case at the Olympic level of performance.

## Conclusion

Increases in competition leads to improving overall performance of athletes and coaches at the highest level of sport. The global mobility of coaches shares the influx of knowledge, expertise and new perspectives. Learning new norms, values and beliefs can be challenging. This discussion explored this topic from the perspective of an Olympic coach. In summary, this discussion expands our understanding that for coaches to better connect with their athletes, understanding their norms, their values and beliefs is a pathway to high performance coaching (Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015).

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